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ABSTRACT

The methods and formula developed by the National Center for Education Statistics for the collection of dropout counts and the formula have been topics of some discussion among various states, including Nevada, and especially Arizona. This paper highlights, from a state's perspective, some of the conceptual, methodological, and statistical considerations that emerge in the collection of national dropout data. One conclusion is that in deriving annual dropout rates, the individual's most recent status should be considered in determining his or her status. The grace period during which a student can return to school and not be counted as a dropout should be left open as long as is feasible. Second, if future dropout-rate formulas continue to adjust for long-term mobility, a further adjustment should be made to minimize the impact of duplicate counting. Third, data collection conducted at grades 7 and 8 most likely will produce inaccurate information. (LMI)

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Determining the National Dropout Statistic -- Considerations From a State's View

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Determining the National Dropout Statistic -- Considerations From a State's View

Over the last six years, the Nevada Department of Education has been conducting statewide research on public school dropouts and reporting the findings to the public in a series of reports and pamphlets, the most recent of which was just released (Smith, 1994). During this time, Department staff have followed, with great interest, efforts by the National Center for Education Statistics to develop national dropout statistics and data collections (e.g., Levine & McLaughlin, 1991; National Center for Education Statistics, 1988, 1991). The Center's efforts have resulted in the inclusion of school district-level dropout counts as part of the annual Common Core of Data collection reported by states to the U.S. Department of Education.

The methods developed by the National Center for the collection of dropout counts and the formula initially proposed have been topics of some discussion among various states, including Nevada -- and especially Arizona. The issues raised led to the formation of a National Dropout Statistic Task Force, the recommendations of which are reviewed elsewhere as part of the present session (Ligon, Hoffman, McMillen, Burnes, Smith, & Paredes, 1994). The function of the present paper in the session is to highlight from a state's perspective some of the conceptual, methodological, and statistical considerations that emerge in the national dropout data collection. Therefore, the discussion will be limited to two issues of considerable concern at the state and local level, identifying dropouts and the problematic effects of student mobility.

Who is a dropout?

It has not been uncommon for a high school principal to request the opportunity to take Department staff into the classroom to meet a student counted as a dropout. The fundamental consideration in any data collection is determining what exactly is it that one's trying to measure. The key methodological issue here involves the time frames of "dropping out of school." The methods proposed by the National Center allows an individual to withdraw or stop attending school during a school year and return to school, either during the school year or at the beginning of the following school year, and <u>not</u> be counted as a dropout.

The time frames proposed by the Center, especially allowing individuals to return at the beginning of the following school year, have been characterized in some quarters as establishing a "grace period." It has been argued that this grace period is arbitrary, that dropout rates for a group of students are misleading if groups differ in their rates of returning to school, that the proportion of "dropouts" who return to school should be measured independently of the "annual" rate, and that this measurement results in stressing "recapture" rather than "prevention."

The conception of a dropout that emerges from such arguments is one of an

individual who leaves, or is absent from, school at any time during the school year without a valid excuse. Such a conception of a school dropout contrasts sharply with the traditional conception of the term "dropout" as an individual who has failed to complete a high school exit program. Ultimately, it is the latter, traditional concern that likely drives efforts to engage in data collection in this area.

If the primary concern is for the non-completer, then the thrust of many of the objections raised to the Center's methods are blunted. Dropout rates among groups who differ in rates of returning to school would not be misleading at all since these students are currently enrolled in a high school completion program. In fact, dropout rates for various groups actually become misleading if the opportunity for student recovery is eliminated and the groups *do* differ in the likelihood of having their educational progress temporarily interrupted, as appears to be the case among ethnic groups in Nevada (Smith, 1994). Further, the same individuals from various groups could be counted repeatedly as dropouts from multiple years. Finally, arguments that set dropout prevention in opposition to student recovery seem somewhat removed from the reality that, in the public education arena, both are important.

For the practical purposes of an annual measurement of dropouts, however, one cannot simply hold open indefinitely the period during which a student may return to school and thereby not be counted as a dropout. For this reason, a strict non-completer conception of "dropout" must be modified for the data collection. Since the data are not reported in the Common Core of Data collection until the year following the dropout count year, the Center's decision to hold open the period during which a student may return to school until the beginning of that school year seems reasonable. Most students who have not returned to school during the school year will return in the fall of the following school year, if they return at all. The decision also allows time for receipt of requests for transcripts for students who transferred to another school late in the dropout count year. Indeed, since the dropout counts are not reported until March of the next year, it seems reasonable to allow students until the following December to return to school.

Although the data collection does not permit a strict non-completer conception of dropout, implicit in the National Center's methods is a conception of dropout determined by an individual's most recent enrollment status. It is this conception that reflects the basic concern expressed in school districts throughout Nevada. Although the local education agencies are concerned for students who repeatedly have their educational progress interrupted, their principal concern is for the current status of the student.

Migration

An acute problem in determining the dropout rate and in tracking the enrollment of students in school is the impact of student movement during the time frames of the dropout count period. The dropout task force considered various types of mobility among student populations, from long-term increases and decreases in school enrollment to short-term movement and seasonal migration. Any such changes impact the student

membership in a school, district, or state and, therefore the denominator in dropout rate formulas. Both types of student movement create problems, particularly in western states and especially in Nevada which has the fastest growing population in the nation and holds the promise of available jobs at low-skill levels.

The initial formula proposed by the National Center for calculating dropout rates attempted to address the issue of long-term increases and decreases in school enrollment. The formula essentially divided the number of dropouts by an average of enrollment and completion for two years plus the number of dropouts. The initial formula was:

$$\frac{\text{Number of dropouts}}{\frac{\text{Fall 1 enrollment in grade} + \text{Fall 2 enrollment in next grade/number of completers}}{2} + \text{Dropouts}}$$

The Fall 1 enrollment reflects the October 1 enrollment reported in the Common Core of Data collection for the dropout count year, and the Fall 2 enrollment reflects the October 1 enrollment reported in the next grade for the following year. The number of completers is substituted for the enrollment in the next grade for the twelfth grade. By averaging the enrollment in, for example, the ninth grade in Fall 1 with the enrollment in tenth grade in the following fall, it assumed that one has estimated a "mid-year" enrollment for the ninth grade during the dropout count year.

Enrollment averaging itself does not create a problem for the dropout rate formula. However, adding in the total number of dropouts to the denominator assumes that the majority of dropouts were not enrolled in the Fall 1 membership count. If this assumption is false, some adjustment must be made in the estimating formula to minimize the impact of students who were enrolled in the fall and subsequently dropped out from being counted twice -- once in the fall enrollment and again as a dropout -- and, thereby, inflating the membership count and artificially lowering the dropout rate.

During the 1991-92 school year in Nevada, for example, roughly 62.3 percent of dropouts were enrolled during the fall, 1991 membership count. Ideally, one would add only the 37.7 percent of students not included in the fall membership count with a resulting dropout rate of 7.8 percent. Using the unadjusted Center formula, the dropout rate would be 7.4 percent. Unfortunately, since the Common Core of Data collection only receives total dropout counts, it is not possible to make such an adjustment. However, if one adjusts the Center's formula only slightly by also dividing the total dropouts in the denominator by two, the resulting dropout rate is 7.7 percent, a number that closely approximates the 7.8 percent derived by eliminating duplicate counting of students in membership.

Although the Center's formula considers increases or decreases in enrollment counts that occur over consecutive school years, it does not address adequately the short-term fluctuations in enrollment that occur during the school year. Such movements

can result in massive changes in enrollment over the course of the year, whether such transiency is generated by migrant agricultural workers in Washington and areas of California or by unskilled job-seekers in Nevada.

For example, in the Las Vegas area, which accounts for over 60 percent of Nevada's student population, student enrollments fluctuate drastically over the course of a single school year as families move into the area seeking employment and leave shortly thereafter if they fail to find a job. Many students are enrolled in schools for less than a grading period. In addition to being under-represented in fall enrollment counts, such students are extremely difficult to track to receiving schools and are likely to be counted incorrectly as dropouts. Requests for transcripts are unlikely to be received for those students who move back to their schools of origin. For students whose families move on to new areas, receiving schools are likely to bypass the Las Vegas schools and request transcripts from the students' previous schools.

One means that has been proposed for dealing with the impact of both long- and short-term mobility on student membership is to replace fall enrollment counts in the denominator with cumulative counts of students over the course of the school year. Unfortunately, such a solution has its drawbacks too. Many states do not collect cumulative enrollment counts, and to do so would require a massive additional data collection burden. The cumulative count could not simply replace official fall enrollment counts for most states' purposes, such as the allocation of funds by enrollment, since the same student could be counted multiple times at different school sites.

This duplicate counting feature also limits the usefulness to dropout accounting of cumulative counts. As one moves beyond the level of the school site, one cannot simply aggregate cumulative counts across schools in a district, across districts in a state, or across states. The multiple counting of students would radically, and inappropriately, lower the dropout rates obtained. Further, efforts to adjust the student membership counts by the length of time that each student spends during the year at each school would be unrealistic for most states.

Determining Seventh and Eighth Grade Dropout Rates

A final concern for states with relatively high rates of student mobility involves collection of dropout data at the junior high/middle school level. Consistent with the National Center's Common Core of Data request, Nevada has begun collecting dropout counts at grades seven and eight. However, the direct interpretation of dropout information at this level must be made with caution. Indeed, there are reasons to question the wisdom of even calculating dropout rates at this level.

The principal means of determining whether a student who no longer attends a school has transferred to another school is the receipt of a request for transcripts. When students in junior high/middle school grades transfer from one school to another, especially another out-of-state school, the receiving school is much less likely to request

a transcript from the sending school than when transfers take place at high school grades where completion of specific courses usually are needed to meet graduation requirements. In the absence of receiving a request for transcript, the middle school student is more likely to be incorrectly identified as a dropout.

Data from the 1992-93 school year in Nevada support the suspicion that a substantial number of seventh and eight grade "dropouts" could actually be enrolled in a school in another locale. Among the seventh and eighth grade dropouts withdrawn by a parent or guardian, 98.1 percent fell into the "No transcript requested" category compared to 75.3 percent among high school dropouts. Among all dropouts recorded for the seventh and eight grade, 97.7 percent fell into the categories of "No transcript requested," "Absent for 10 or more days whereabouts unknown," and "Non-returns," compared to 69.8 percent of high school dropouts. A Non-return student is one who completed the previous school year, but failed to return to a school in the following fall. Thus, one should be very skeptical about the findings and rates reported for seventh and eighth grade dropouts.

Summary

Although the present paper raises more questions than it answers, some useful directions seem clear from the perspective of a small, but rapidly growing, state. First, the primary concern in dropout research is for the individual who fails to complete high school. In deriving annual dropout rates, the individual's *most recent status* must be considered in determine his or her status as a dropout. The period during which a student can return to school and not be counted as a dropout should be left open as long as is feasible within the constraints of reporting in spring of the following year.

Second, the National Center for Education Statistics is to be applauded for efforts to adjust dropout rates for long-term increases and decreases in student enrollment. If future dropout rate formulas continue to adjust for long-term mobility, a further adjustment must be made to minimize the impact of duplicate counting of school dropouts in student membership. Unfortunately, there may not be an suitable adjustment available to correct for the impact of large short-term fluctuations in student enrollment during the school year.

Finally, one must question the wisdom of collecting dropout information at grades seven and eight. While policy ideally should be guided by the best information available, it usually is better to have no information available than to have the wrong information in hand.

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